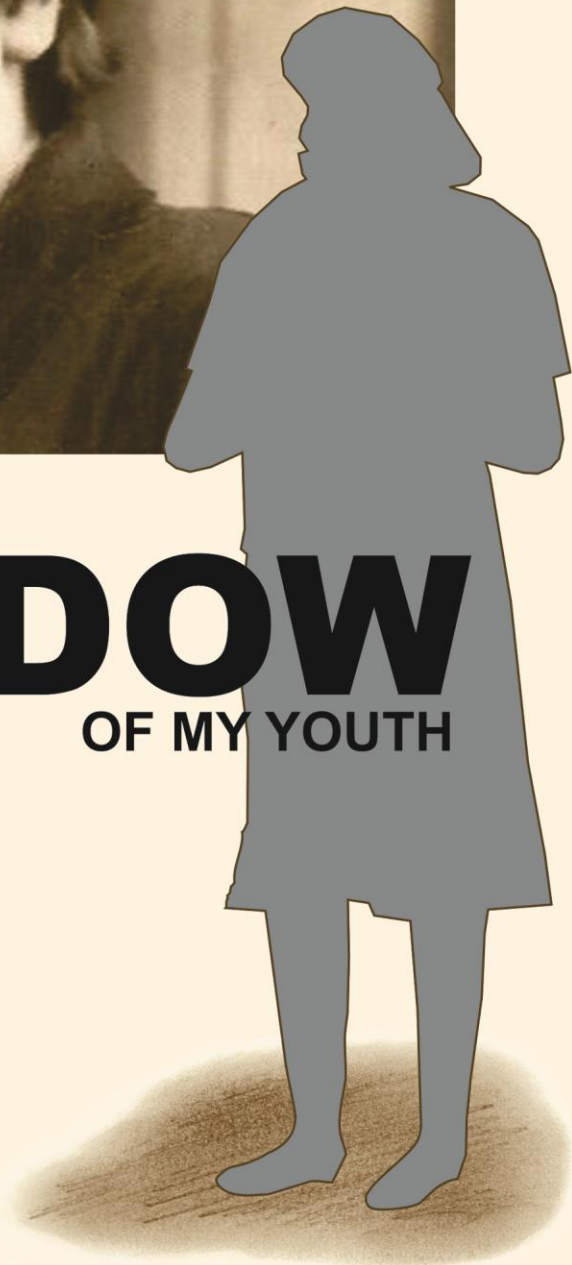


**Pesia Zislin**

**Holocaust survivor from the Dvinsk Ghetto**



**THE**  
**SHADOW**  
**OF MY YOUTH**





## **Acknowledgment**

Thanks to my dearest friends Kaye and Ian Stewart, who stood with me on this journey of writing this booklet of my Mum's Memoir.



## **Mom's Introduction**

"I recall my youth as being carefree and happy. The economic situation was tolerable and the atmosphere was quiet and happy. In the summer we could go as a group by canoe on the river Dvina until we reached the Polish border. In the winter, we threw snowballs or rented a horse and sled and drove around the streets of Kraslava, laughing, singing and shouting. The moon would be glistening brightly just as it does today, and our hearts were full of joy and hope for the future.

Many years have passed since that time. I'm the only survivor of my entire family. Probably the majority of my friends were killed and for those who did survive, for many years afterwards, their youthful memories were forgotten.

The cruel and brutal war wiped out the good and beautiful children of our village."

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# 1. My Family

When people ask me where I'm from, I explain that I was born in Latvia, in a small village on the Russian and Polish border, called Kraslava. This village is situated 3 km from the railway station, near the River Dvina. The river divided the village into two parts. On one side was the township and on the other was a large forest where people from all over Latvia came to relax and enjoy themselves.

In my memory, Kraslava and my childhood seem almost sacred. Many generations of my family were born and lived there.



Road sign



Kraslava village

My parents Jacob and Sara Mossia were very quiet, gentle people. Butchers may seem to be rough and insensitive, but my father was very shy and compassionate, and very industrious in his work. He trusted people and people trusted him. I remember when people would ask my Father what his "parnuse" (livelihood) was, he would answer:

"Mir Fort Arjen for Ideal and Freidel, Das Pernusa"

(To be polite and happy, this is my livelihood!).

My mother was the dominant one in the family. She wore the pants. She was a wonderful, energetic, intelligent

woman. She had good taste and always seemed to understand me well. My parents both worked very hard in the butchery to make a living, and to educate their children. Father would go to the market in the big city of Dvinsk to buy a calf, then he would slaughter it and bring back the meat. All the meat was kept in a large cooled cellar. The ice had been collected during the cold winter days.

At the shop it was hard for my father when women would come to buy meat and sausages, because they used to pester him for one part and then change their minds to something else. This job he passed over to Mom.

Mom also used to introduce young men and women to each other. She was not a matchmaker and did not ask for any payment, simply because the shop was a meeting place for people from all the surrounding villages.

Gatherings in the shop were friendly and everyone knew each other well.

My mother, along with some other mothers, helped to establish a kindergarten in Kraslava. There were 17 children and our teacher, Lisa, always looked very elegant.



My mother

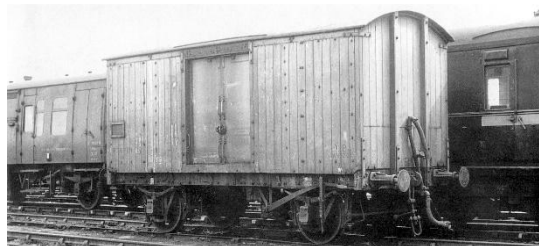


I am 2 years old

During Purim, I recall going with our housekeeper, Mania, to take our teacher "mishloah manot" (a special custom of sharing sweets with each other).

We lived at my grandparents' house on Haber St. It was an enormous house with 4 rooms, a kitchen and 2 basements, one for storing blocks of ice during the summer in order to keep the meat fresh.

There were 3 children. I was the eldest, Rachel was my middle sister and Nathan was my younger brother. He was clever and we adored him so much. My grandfather Isaac Mendel Zislin lived with us. He had a cattle transporting business on the trains, selling and getting money or gold.



A cattle train

I remember his company stamp: Vitebsk Gubernaya (district)  
Dvinskaya Ozyz (township)  
Mieszcze Kraslava (place)

He was a very humble man. At the synagogue, he sat with the poorer people and was concerned about and was interested in everybody. He believed that God exists everywhere. He died on the night of Suckot when he was 73 years old. Many people came to his funeral and one famous man, Isaac Rodeman, spoke in appreciation of him. We were in deep mourning, especially my father. At the time of Grandpa Yitzik Mendel's death, I was about 10 years old, but I remember this period very clearly. My parents were forced to move to another place.



It happened because of a conflict with my uncle, Shmerl. While Grandpa lay on his deathbed, Shmerl stole his will, took his possessions and excluded my father's part although all those years my grandfather had lived with us and we had treated him with great love!



My parents: Sara and Jacob, my sister Rachel on the left, my brother Nathan



My sister Rachel was beautiful, quiet and pleasant, and liked to embroider.



1938



Rachel creation from 1937

My brother Nathan was loved by everyone. He was an outstanding student. When I was in Riga and he was studying in a Vocational College in Dvinsk, he wrote to me: "Mir zeal al-taj shreiben a brib, wael der Tate gait entekagen dum Pashtlan (Post Office) on the then mir krigat nieta briebe ze hoben a shlechte shtetm" ("We must write letters to our parents, because when Father passes by the post office and does not get a letter from us, they will be very sad") My mother went to Dvinsk to enrol him in the Vocational College. At first he wanted to study mechanics, but there was no room in the class. In the end, he was enrolled in a carpentry course and at the end of the year, he could switch to mechanics.

My brother Nothankha (Nathan) studied hard there. He, with one of his friends, rented a room near the school so they didn't need to return daily to Kraslava.

## 2. My Childhood

### ***School days***

I remember my first day at school. A schoolbag was bought for me and I wore a blue uniform. I was so proud that I was grown up. I felt like a peacock, and imagined that everyone was looking at me. I felt so happy that I was going to a Jewish School, where I studied Yiddish (the historical language of the Ashkenazi Jew), geography and so on.

### ***Happy memories***

The stories of the Bible gave me a special feeling. I remember the play in which Eliezer went to look for a wife for Isaac, and I was in the role of Rivka. My favorite author was Yitzhak Leibush Peretz and his special stories I remember by heart. There was a funny song I recall. It was about the Rabbi who was amazed when he first saw a "locomotive" and he couldn't understand how water is put in below and smoke comes out from above (:



Old Locomotive

### ***The report card***

I was about to finish the first semester at elementary school, and I was waiting impatiently for my report. On that day we received report cards – all the pupils (maybe most of them) received them, but I didn't, even though I used to have a private tutor at home. I clearly remember that I had a friend Luba, who copied my entire homework which I'd prepared with my private teacher, and she actually received an excellent grade. In retrospect, I realize that I was smart enough, but I did not have enough self-confidence.

### ***Remembering my classmates***

My friend Rosa's parents had a shoe shop. My parents used to buy their shoes for free and her parents bought sausages from my parents. The family of my friend Rachel prayed in the Hasidim synagogue and her brother was the manager there. They would come to visit our house on Shabat for tea. We were also in touch with my friend Lazer's family. His parents bought cow leather from us, selling it as part of their business. I remember Palhin, our Hebrew teacher who had 3 sons: one was a Communist, the second a Zionist and the third was a Gordonist (:

### 3. The Youth Movement "Hashomer Hatzair"

At ten years of age I was accepted into "Hashomer Hatzair" (meaning: The Young Guard).



Me at Lag Ba'omer 1931

My group leader was our talented neighbour named Betzael Kohen. I enjoyed all the activities. We learned to speak and sing in Hebrew. We went on trips and camps for several days, sometimes even for a week. From the age of ten through to eighteen, I was part of the "Hashomer Hazair" and it contributed a great deal to my upbringing.



The Hashomer Hatzair' emblem – Its slogan: "Be strong and courageous"

### ***Sharing the Movement's ideas***

At first I was a "Havera" (the 1<sup>st</sup> level). I can remember the day we swore allegiance to the Movement and promised to be honest and faithful "Havereem". It was such a cold, snowy day. Our meeting house – the commune, was very old and located on a small road that led to the River Dvina. At that ceremony we were given dark red ties to wear. At the swearing-in ceremony we declared:

"Anee nishba behen tzidkee...Chazak ve Ematz"  
("I swear to keep the faith ...to be strong and courageous")

It was so powerful to me!

Later, when I was a "Terona" (the 2<sup>nd</sup> level), our meeting place was near the post office and we wore green ties. After several years, I became a "Tzofa" (the 3<sup>rd</sup> level), and then we met by the pharmacy and wore blue ties. All of these meeting places were very cold, because there was never enough money to buy fuel to heat them. Sometimes there wasn't even any money to pay the rent. Once, in order to raise rent money, we went raspberry picking with our leader, Betzalel. Unfortunately, we were caught trespassing and it was a very embarrassing and unpleasant situation.

### ***The camp on Kuressaare Island***

In 1934 when I was 14 years old, we went on a great camp on Kuressaare Island near Estonia. It was a very expensive trip, so all of us shared our money in order to enable those who didn't have enough to go. We traveled from Kraslava by train to Riga, a distance of 240 km. In the Riga Gulf we boarded a ship and sailed out to the Baltic Sea, where we reached our destination.





The way from Kraslava to Kuressaare Island

We shared in activities there with the other youth groups from Dvinsk. At the camp, we studied orienteering and morse code. I remember a funny incident, when one of my friends was tied up by the others and he shouted: "Ich bin oich a Yid" ("I'm also a Jew!") It was such a joyful time. We used to sing all night long. The songs were about our Father's Land of Israel. We knew them by heart without understanding the whole meaning.

"Po beeretz hemdat Avot ,

Titgashemna kol hatikvot"

("There in our Father's Land all our hopes will come true..!")

That particular camp was a very special one but in fact, every summer we would go camping somewhere. Several times, when camps were held in the forest on the other side of the River Dvina, we'd go for long walks in the summer heat. I have such good memories of those times.



8th grade Class photo

I recall our teacher's final words when I finished 8th grade:

"Now you are together, everyone has taken care of the

I recall our teacher's final words when I finished 8th grade:

"Now you are together, everyone has taken care of the other, but as time passes, everyone will go his own way and in the future you will be happy to meet up again and share your experiences with each other. The main thing is to be happy and satisfied!"

At the age of sixteen, I became a "Shomera" (the 4<sup>th</sup> level).

Our swearing-in ceremony was held at Chocolate Mountain. We all carved our names on a tree there. It's been many years since that event, but even now, that is a very precious memory.

### ***ORT in Riga***

When I was 13 years old, I signed up for the ORT – a Vocational School in Riga, because in our local High School the study language was not Yiddish, and studying in the Latvian language was too hard.



I arrived there on Sunday. It was horrible – I could hardly bear being alone, so far from my parents. I cried and wanted to go back home. I did not think about the days off when I could go home for the vacations, I just thought about studying there for 3 long years ...

I decided to return home at the first opportunity, and so after several days, I joined some merchants who came from Kraslava to Riga and returned home with them. I then started working as a seamstress at Leah Zeif's workshop.

### ***The "Collective day" 1936***

At Purim, when I was 16-17 years old, we held a "Collective day" in our Movement. I got the job of making coffee. I stood by the stove, the milk warmed up and spoiled. I really did not know when it was supposed to be ready, because I'd never made coffee for myself – at our home, there was always Augustina (our housekeeper) around. In retrospect, I realise that the period of "Hachshara" – the Training, helped me further in my Ghetto survival. On that "Collective day" we had to stay at the club at night. I was allowed to attend but on one condition, that I didn't stay there at night. I remember that at night I went back home to sleep and early in the morning, at 5:00 am, I ran back to the club. Running alone, I was quite scared, so I whistled all the way. When I finally got there, everyone was still asleep.

### ***Joining the Kibutz 1937***

When I was 18 years old before the "Training" ("Hachshara"), Mom asked me to come and choose cloth to make into a coat. She went especially to the city of Dvinsk, to buy a gray fur. When I got to the "Training", I used the coat as a blanket during the freezing

days. Anyone who went looking for a job, wore this coat in order to make a respectable impression. It certainly became an important coat!

At this time I had to decide whether to continue with the Movement training ("Hachshara") or to leave it.

I was dreaming of Israel, but it was very difficult to convince my parents to allow me this aspiration. However I succeeded, and after Sukkot in 1937 I went to Riga to join the "Kibutz Genosar", which eventually went to Israel.

A young man Kopel, from my home town Kraslava, helped me to adjust to the Kibutz lifestyle and I soon felt at home. Initially, I worked in the Storage Depot, but I didn't enjoy my work there. Then I worked in the kitchen. The rooms were extremely large and in winter were extremely cold! We covered ourselves with coats. We were young and strong and we overcame all the difficulties with a positive attitude.

After 10 months, a group of us were sent to work in agriculture on a farm. My friend Hanna and I worked for six months in Sakronda village. We were sent there to help on our friend's family farm, where the father had died and our labour was needed to enable them to make ends meet. It was a great summer with lot of adventures and experiences that I will never forget.

In this village, I was taught how to work hard, enthusiastically and patiently. I coped with useful experiences that helped me overcome the difficult times ahead.

### ***Preparing to emigrate to Israel***

At the end of 1939 when we returned from the farm, two of our group emigrated to Israel. I started working for the Zionist Journal collection. I also became determined to

emigrate to Israel and decided to do so through "Aliyah Bet" (an illegal emigration society). At first only my mother knew about my plans, my father did not. One day he came home from the synagogue, really furious, because he'd heard people talking about my plans to emigrate illegally. My mother had to lie to him, telling him that it was not true. Anyway, I took a holiday and went home to Kraslava. I'd organized a passport and visa to Trieste and all the necessary documentation to leave Latvia. I just needed to wait for a telegram giving me an exact exit date. I was sad to leave my family, relatives and friends! But this was my wish!!! Unfortunately, fate stepped in...

## 4. War on the Doorstep

The Second World War broke out and Poland, which I needed to travel through, was at war. This was a tremendous blow. My parents had barely raised the 800 Litim to pay for my tickets and now all my dreams and all my plans had been destroyed. I felt crushed, desperate and I didn't know what to do. I took another holiday. After a while, during the summer of 1940, the Russians took over Latvia and closed down the groups I'd been associating with. All of us struggled to find a place within this new regime, but our underlying aim was always to go to Israel.

### ***Our last meeting***

We discovered that the Russians were following and spying on us, so our group gathered for our last meeting by the River Dvina. We decided to separate and not endanger ourselves, hoping that one day, in the future, we'd be able to fulfil our dreams and meet again.



We wrote our names on a sheet of paper, sealed and buried it.

In this same way, the dreams of many of my friends were buried. Of those who survived, only a few succeeded in going to Israel.

### ***The Russians take over***

Shortly after the Russians arrived in Kraslava, we as Jews, felt unwanted. We didn't fit into their new scheme. It was hard to find work in Kraslava, so I went to Riga. It was also hard to find work there, but finding a place to live was even worse. Eventually I found accommodation with my sister Rachel and we began working in a factory. I really worked hard and fast and I managed to do a particular job in one day that took two days for the others. I was sewing Tricot / cotton underwear and worked so well that I was given a special award and my photo, including an article was printed in the "Tzina" newspaper.

Maybe I could have become even more successful, but after just one month, war broke out on our doorstep! On that particular day, I was travelling home on holiday to Kraslava. It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941 and for us the Second World War began in earnest then. My sister Rachel had stayed behind in Riga. We'd kissed farewell, but at that time we didn't know that it would be our final kiss, our final farewell. I often relive that moment, when she closed the door after me. Unbearably, my dear sister was caught with other Jewish girls in the first wave of round ups, and was brutally murdered.

### ***Impending disaster in Kraslava***

My brother Nathan also returned home on holiday. He'd been studying at the Technical school in Dvinsk (47 km from Kraslava). My parents were so pleased to see us. From the first day of the war we had a terrible sense of imminent danger. A huge wave of refugees came to Kraslava from Lita and other nearby areas. The Germans began to drop bombs on the villages and people were in a perpetual state of terror. We decided to run away. We packed a few selected belongings onto a cart and traveled towards the Russian border. On the way there we met

some people going back to Kraslava. They told us that they'd been to the border, but they weren't allowed through. We were really discouraged and so returned home. It was a fatal mistake – the border opened shortly afterwards and we could've escaped.

### ***Nathan's injury***

It was extremely dangerous in the village. There was constant bombing and shooting all around us. Most of the time, we sheltered in our basement, but on one occasion my brother went outside to help someone and was hit by shrapnel in both legs.

After a several days of fighting, it quietened down and several people who'd been hiding with us in our basement, escaped from the village across the border into Russia. Because of my brother's leg wounds, we couldn't go. There was no-one to safely remove the shrapnel and so we had to face and endure the approaching horror.

### ***Germans advance***

On the 26<sup>th</sup> or 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1941, the Germans marched into Kraslava. From the first moment, it appeared that the Latvian citizens co-operated with them. They became arrogant in their attitude towards us and took any Jewish property at will and ruined what they left behind. This happened in my own home.

We moved to the basement of my Uncle Schmerl. His house was located in the centre of the village, surrounded by many shops, and few Jews lived there. I hid in the attic because I'd heard horrible stories about the fate of young girls and Jews that were found. My friend Zeruch Cohen and his father (well-known Zionists in our area), were dragged from their house and shot on the way to the Railway station.

The Germans took 20 Jews, among them were my uncles Shimon, Solper, Joel and David Levin and some others. There were also some refugees from Lita. They were taken to the banks of the River Dvina and were shot in cold blood. Our fears grew to enormous proportions and our village became as silent as a cemetery.

Each family tried to take care of itself. Both Germans and Latvians abused young girls and women. We waited for a miracle, but the miracle didn't come. My young friend Moshe Levy told me that several students from his class came to his house to kill him. He was able to slip from the room where he was hiding into a house nearby. His classmates came looking for him several more times. Unfortunately, his end was the same as the majority of Kraslova Jewry. He was sent with his mother and his sister Dvora to the Dvinsk Ghetto and was shot. The Goyim (Gentiles/non Jews) destroyed, abused and killed and no-one tried to stop them. On the contrary, there were very few who took pity on the Jews.

### ***A fearful announcement***

After several days, posters were put up announcing that all the Jews must gather on a certain day at the local synagogue. Factory owners and others with special protection rights could stay in the village, but everyone else must obey the order. There were 3 synagogues: a small one, a bigger stone one and the largest one, which was white. There we were forced to gather.

Families were in every corner surrounded by packages, suitcases and prams. A group of young Latvian toughs came to watch us.





Gathering near the Synagogue

### ***A helpful policeman***

We heard a report that the next day we would all be forced to go to the Dvinsk Ghetto, 47km away. My family had a exemption certificate because of my brother's wounds. A Latvian doctor named Bokum visited us, took care of my brother Nathan and gave us a certificate for my whole family to remain temporarily in the village. I wanted to to be with all the Jews. My parents tried to stop me but I insisted and sadly went to join the Jews at the synagogue, where my grandparents had prayed.

In that Synagogue, during "Simchat Torah" we had danced with the Torah scroll, but now I was sitting in fear with everyone, waiting for the unknown. Suddenly, a Latvian policeman recognized me. His name was Orp and he was my age. His father was shoemaker. I did not really know him but it seemed that in our childhood we had both lived on the same street. He had recognized me even after so many years. He knew that my family had an exemption certificate and so he asked me: "Why are you here?" I said: "I want to be with my boyfriend!" He laughed and replied immediately: "What? You are not going to be

with your boyfriend. They are not taking you to live. You should go home quickly!" Actually, I readily accepted his suggestion, because I hadn't left my parents entirely wholeheartedly. I asked him, "So, how can I get out?" He said that he would take me and he did. My parents were so happy to see me. I remember they gave him something...

## **5. To the Ghetto, via Dvinsk**

In the morning, some Goyim with horses and carts came over and took all the Kraslava Jews to Dvinsk. The same bitter fate was for everyone, young and old, rich and poor. Afterwards, it was said that on the way to Dvinsk, some of the Goyim took the Jews into the forest where they shot them and stole their belongings. We knew our turn would come soon.

In our Uncle Shmerl's house, where we were staying, also lived a family named Paskin (there were 3 brothers, their wives and children). They owned a factory and my father worked there in order to prolong our right to stay in the village for a while.

***"You have 5 minutes to leave!"***

The Paskin family assumed that we'd all be safe for a while, but 10 or 12 days after the first group of Jews were deported, a policeman came and gave my family 5 minutes to leave. We were desperate. We didn't know what to do with my dearest brother, to take him with us on a stretcher or to leave him with the Paskins in the house. As we had no time to wait or to think, one of the Paskin brothers, who had lost his family, promised to take care of him. We sorrowfully left behind my brother Nothana (Nathan), just 16 years old.

My brother Nathan



We hoped he'd be safe, but NO! As we heard later on, he was murdered – shot in the back.

### ***At the Synagogue***

The police immediately took us to the synagogue where there were 15 horses and carts waiting for us and the other villagers. My father met a Goy he knew quite well called Sakson, who used to live near the railway station. This Goy offered my parents a cheap deal to move them by cart to Dvinsk. Suddenly I saw his son wearing a red ribbon on his arm and holding a pistol. I said: "No, I'm not going with him!" My father was very cross with me, as he didn't see any pistol. Anyway, we hired another cart and thus we left Kraslava via Dvinsk.

On the way, at the 22<sup>nd</sup> km I noticed that several carts were missing and then I heard shooting from the forest near the road. That Goy Sakson, who had wanted us to go with him, took a very old couple named Vishkin, and detoured into the forest where his son murdered them.



Road signs via Dvinsk (now named Daugavpils)

### ***Thrown into jail***

In the evening we arrived at Dvinsk (nowdays its name is Daugavpils). We were thrust into the prison, one family to a cell. The next day, amidst shouting and hitting, we were taken out into a yard and from there to the Ghetto. In the yard of the jail, we met my friend Frania and her sister-in-law who was a Goya (not a Jew). They'd been in the jail for 2 days and now they were going to the Ghetto with us. They told us horrible news which had happened 10 or 12 days previously to the Jews who had been taken from Kraslava. It seemed impossible to believe them, for they told us that no-one had survived.

We were very naive. We wanted to believe that the Germans and the Latvians had just taken them to another Ghetto. The Dvinsk Ghetto was an abandoned Latvian Army Camp and our room was a stable.



The Latvian Fortress

All of the 13 Kraslova Jews that stayed there at that time were confined to that one room and we became like a big family. We helped each other and shared and were grateful just to be together.

I met 3 girls, Riva, Mira and Sonia, who had been taken in the very first deportation. They'd been sent to work outside the Ghetto and when they'd returned, there were no

Kraslava Jews left. They told us that the Germans promised to move them to the Riga Ghetto, where the conditions might be better. I said goodbye to them and never saw them again. After the war I met a man who'd been in Riga Ghetto. He confirmed that he had seen those girls, but none of them had survived.



Ghetto Dvinsk



Ghetto Jews are allowed to wash in the Dvina river

## 6. Facing the Horror

The conditions in Dvinsk Ghetto were terrible. It was very crowded because Jews from all over Dvinsk area were brought there. There was hardly any water to drink, let alone wash, and no food. At first, when I was not working, there was nothing to eat. When someone got onions, we would make a small bonfire to cook the onion. This smell, even today and every time I fry onions, makes me remember... People who were sent to work could get food, but those who remained behind, like the old, the sick and the children, were starving and their fate could realistically only be death!

### ***The first 'Aktion'***

We arrived at the Ghetto in August. After 2 weeks, on the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1941 we experienced our first 'Aktion' (a violent organized attack by the Germans). I was working then with 15 others at the German Army Camp in Grolianka. We didn't have any permits for that work, but we washed clothes and fed soldiers who came through there to the front. We were given food and were happy to be able to leave the Ghetto albeit temporarily. My father was working too, as a council worker.

On that day, as we were returning to the Ghetto, we met several Jews who told us that an 'Aktion' was taking place. There was no escape for us. In the Ghetto I saw trains and long rows of Jews waiting in lines of six. The Germans and the Latvians were checking work permits and sending people either to the right side or to the left. There was no way to tell which way meant death and which meant life. I was watching carefully and saw my childhood friend Riva, whom I knew from the Movement, waiting near her sister who had a permit. The Germans looked at her sister's



permit and tore it up. I felt that something dreadful was going to happen.

As I was standing near the back, I slipped away and ran, looking for some form of escape. I couldn't find my parents and it was getting very dark. I looked up to the sky, at the shining stars. There I saw the face of my precious Grandfather and all of a sudden, I felt safe as if he were taking care of me. Out of the blue, I bumped into Isaac, a Jewish policeman and begged him for help. He promised that if I were caught and sent for execution, he would bring an officer and have me released. He meant well, but I knew that I couldn't count on him. I thought, how could he possibly have enough influence to do such a thing? I left him and continued searching for my parents. I was lucky enough to meet another man from Kraslava named Gelfen, who had a permit for several people. He took me as his daughter and because of him I was able to survive the 'Aktion'.

When I returned to my room, I found my parents in tears, thinking that I had been taken away to my death. We were hugely relieved to see each other. Many families were sent away and killed although the Germans promised that they were just sending them to another Ghetto. In order to make people believe them, they also sent a doctor and gave the people bread for the journey. Many believed their lies and ate the bread with relish. The two days of the 'Aktion' passed and the survivors continued their life struggle in this appalling situation.

### ***A new job***

After a few days, two Germans officers in blue uniforms came into the Ghetto looking for 2 women to work. The Ghetto people always used to wait by the gate, hoping to

be selected for work, but they were very frightened of the Germans and showed it.

I didn't sense any danger and I didn't feel afraid and so, from among all the women, I was chosen and also a girl named Ettie Levov. They took us to the city of Dvinsk and even allowed us to buy vegetables on the way.

We worked there, in the Technical school for some older German people. We cleaned the floors, washed their clothes and polished their shoes. The only payment we got was the leftovers of their meals. I gathered up every scrap of food, even the cigarette butts for my father. My parents were so happy that I could go to work and bring back a little food, which we shared with everyone in our room.

### ***Dreadful news***

Soon my mother also got some work. It was a long journey to our work place, but we were just so happy to be able to leave the Ghetto and get something to eat. On one occasion, as we were walking to work, my mother met a Goya from Kraslava. As I walked on, she stayed and talked for several minutes, but then my mother caught up with me and began to cry. Amidst her sobs, she told me the horrible news about the Jews who had been taken from Kraslava. They were rounded up and taken into the forest and shot! My brother Nathan, who couldn't walk, was taken by Tralsky, the murderer, on his cart, thrown into a pit with everyone else and killed. I was numbed by such horrendous news. That my dearest beloved brother, the youngest of us, had finished his life in such a terrible way, alone with no comfort! A long time passed before we could come to terms with it.

### ***Pastranak's lot***

Autumn arrived and it was very cold. We were constantly being searched for valuables and we were ordered to give up all our treasures. In our room was a family named Pastranak. He was a Ghetto policeman. His two sisters were also with him; one with her husband and the other a widow with her daughter. They'd secretly sent their children for safety to a Catholic church priest in Kraslava. But on the night of "Rosh Hashana" an old Goya arrived in the Ghetto with 6-8 children on her cart. Among them were Pastranak's children and also Paskin's daughter. What a tragedy! The Kraslava people had discovered the secret and sent the children back to the Ghetto. The Jewish children whose parents were already dead were killed. Pastranak's lot was a miserable one. As a Ghetto policeman, he was forced by higher authorities to hang a woman named Gettelson. They brought her on a cart to a two storey building and from the window of the second floor Pastranak was made to put a rope around her neck. The cart was driven away and the woman was left hanging.

This act was repeated again when Germans caught a beautiful Jewish woman walking in the city wearing a scarf that covered her yellow badge. Everyone was forced to watch these hangings and even now, after so many years later, I shudder in horror to think of it.

### ***My father's ordeal***

My Grandfather's Remembrance Day was on the Eve of Suckot and between my parents, there was a mild disagreement. My mother suggested that as a mark of respect, my father shouldn't go to work. However, my father argued that considering our circumstances, he should go to work and spend time later in prayer and so he left. While he was working at the Railway station, he

unexpectedly met a Goy from his past, who was travelling from Riga to Kraslava. This Goy threw my father a package of food, but unfortunately, a German guard saw it. The Germans beat my father badly and dragged him away to prison.

In the evening, all the workers returned to the Ghetto, but my father wasn't among them. My mother and I were naturally worried and went to the Jewish Ghetto representatives to ask what had happened. They would only tell us that he would return the next day. When my father came back we could hardly recognize him. His face and his body were so bruised and swollen and he could hardly stand by himself. For a long time he couldn't get off his seat. My mother and I took as much care of him as we could. When he recovered he started working again, but although he was only 51 years old he'd become a very old man.

### ***Cleaning the pots***

Although by now only a small number of people were in the ghetto, food didn't come easily plus there was no means of cooking. I was working for the old Germans at the Railway kitchen. My job was to peel potatoes and to clean the big pots that were used to cook food for the soldiers passing through to the Front. I was chosen for this job, because I was tall, thin and could lean into the pots and clean them. These pots were continuously on the stove, the heat was never turned off and my fingertips were always burnt and caused me a lot of pain, but I decided never to complain.

The Germans called me "Zara" and complimented me on my diligence, which was helpful in the future. I scraped all the leftovers from the pots and brought them back to the Ghetto. I remember cleaning off pudding. I did not like it, but I knew that the children loved it. When I returned to the

Ghetto, people were waiting for me to come and my precious Mom would divide the food among the neighbours. I felt that I had done a good thing.

After work, I remember, my father would rub my hands. This was very painful because of the burns, but they had also been frozen by the cold weather. In such circumstances, with constant feelings of fear for our future, we endured one day after the next.

### ***Motke's survival***

In October, when we were still living in the stable, I noticed some new people. I approached them and a young man introduced himself. His name was Motke and he came from a small village in Lithuania. He told me that he, with all the Jews had been taken from his village to the forest and shot. When the murderers threw sand over the bodies and left the area, he waited until dark and then climbed out of the pit. A Goy hid him briefly and told him about the Dvinsk Ghetto "where Germans don't kill Jews". Although troubled by his wound, he made his way to Dvinsk, where some Jewish workers found him and brought him to our stable. During the 14<sup>th</sup> Memorial of WWII, I met Motke again in Tel-Aviv, but he was very old and ill and his memory had deteriorated.

### ***Red permits***

After a period of comparative safety, we sensed the approach of a new "Aktion" coming. It arrived in the form of an order that from November the 7<sup>th</sup>, only Jews with 'red permits' from the Gebitz Kommissar, would be allowed to leave the Ghetto for work. Our permits were white. For two days, 25 of us who had been working at the Railway Station, were unable to leave the Ghetto.



Dvinsk Railway Station

Shultz, our German Work Commander, took our white permits and returned with only eight red ones. Four women were chosen: Me, Raya, Frania and Yente. The four men who were chosen were Zeleg, Spongen, Schulman and Leib Antikol.



Leib Antikol

### ***Leib Antikol and me***

As it has been said, Leib Antikol and I were chosen with six of the others to work at the Railway Station. He worked as an expert tailor and was very much valued by the Germans. His wife and his only 7 year old daughter had been murdered at the beginning of the war. Even though he was 25 years older than me, our friendly relationship developed into a very close one.

### ***Hiding my face***

Before leaving the Ghetto, all our necessary documentation was checked in the Square. Each worker stood in his work group holding his Red Permit. There were policemen checking them and from time to time I saw them pull several people out of the line and put them to one side. I could only guess that one of the policemen had known the workers and was going to punish them. When I saw my friend Sasha and another person who I recognized as being from Kraslava, being dragged out I knew, since I was from Kraslava too, I was in danger.

Instinctively, to hide my face, I pulled the scarf I was wearing further over my head.

### ***Knocking heads***

We marched to the gate. A patrol of Latvian policemen checked off the names of the Jews who were leaving the Ghetto. In front of me was a woman named Leah, whose sister-in-law was a well known Communist. The policemen grabbed her and began to knock her head against the wall of a house. With each blow they shouted: "This one is for Stalin, this one is for Lenin....etc." Leah shouted that she wasn't a Communist, only her sister in-law was, but it made no difference. They continued until she collapsed and I can still hear her muffled screams.

### ***Father's last 'Aktion'***

Unexpectedly, there was another "Aktion". It lasted three days and many, many Jews were taken. In the morning we had left the Ghetto for work, leaving behind our parents, brothers and sisters, children and our friends. In the evening, when we came back we couldn't find anyone. My good friend Raya had a 5 year daughter, a beautiful child named Bella. In the morning she had cried and begged not to be left in the Ghetto, but to be taken to work



with us. But how could we take her? It was impossible! I found my mother, who managed to survive and together we started searching everywhere for my father, but we never found him. Apparently, he had been hiding with some other Jews in the sewer when they were discovered and shot.

After the 'Aktion', Isaac Drizin, who worked for the Jewish Ghetto police, took my mother as his own. He would have taken my father also if he had survived. Isaac was married to a non Jewish woman who stayed with him in the Ghetto. In October she'd had a baby daughter and Isaac begged her to leave the Ghetto. At first she refused, but after the horror of the 'Aktion' she decided to go. Isaac arranged a work permit for her and she left, carrying her baby in a large basket. All three of them survived.

### ***Conditions in the Ghetto***

After that awful 'Aktion' we got permission from the Germans at the Railway station to live in town instead of the Ghetto. Shultz came with a cart and the eight of us with our belongings, went to the City. It was difficult because two of the men had to leave their sons behind in the Ghetto. One had narrowly escaped death by slipping out of a row. He survived the war and became a newspaper reporter. I tried to arrange for my mother to be brought to town, but she needed a special work permit and the Germans refused to give her one.

The situation in the Ghetto was becoming worse. The winter was extremely cold. There was no possibility of washing, therefore everyone was very,very dirty. It wasn't surprising that there was typhus.

Hunger was rampant – people were rationed to 99grams of bread a day. Those who went out to work from the Ghetto could bring something back for their families, but

for those who didn't work, there was nothing. I cried all day long and couldn't eat because I knew my mother was hungry. Once the chef gave me a permit to enable a German to go to the Ghetto and take some food to my mother. I asked the German to bring back a note from her proving that she'd received the food and so he did.

Antikol, my friend who we worked with, helped us with the bread supply. He was a tailor and at nights he illegally sewed for the Goyim, who paid him with bread.

### ***The needle***

The year 1942 approached with a new order that it was forbidden to enter the Ghetto from the city. We could only pass near the gate. The people inside the Ghetto would wait by the gate, hoping for someone to bring them food. Several times, Raya, Antikol and I went to the Ghetto gate with bread. I would cut it and Raya and Antikol would divide it among the people. Sometimes there was no piece for my mother because she was standing at the back of the crowd and everyone was pushing.

Once, in the crush, a needle that had been holding Antikol's "Yellow Patch" onto his sleeve, was thrust into his arm. We tied his arm to his side so the needle wouldn't move. During the day he felt an awful pain in his chest and in the evening Shultz took him to a Jewish physician in the Ghetto. Even though the conditions were much less than sanitary, this doctor succeeded in removing the needle.

### ***My toxic choice***

On New Year's Eve 1942, the Germans gave us packages containing sweets. I sent mine to Pastranak's children. Antikol divided his among several children too. It was at this time that I was lucky enough to obtain some poison. I put it in a small container and hung it around my neck. I really considered myself so fortunate to have this poison – I always said that I never wanted to see the grave that they'd prepared for me, that if I had the least opportunity, I'd use the poison and kill myself first.

### ***Mom's terrifying experience***

Once when I was lucky enough to meet my mother by the Ghetto gate, she told me about a horrible incident that she'd just been through. All the Jews in the Ghetto had been rounded up and stood in a long line. Then the Germans walked along counting, and every tenth person was taken out and put with their face to the wall in order to be shot. My mother was one of those selected. It was only at the very last moment that a policeman came with papers to release her. This was a punishment for the escape of several Jews to Poland, as we had understood that they weren't killing the Jews there. In fact, the Polish Jews suffered the same fate as the Jews of Latvia.

### ***Antikol is beaten***

Winter passed and the weather became a little warmer. I got permission to go into the Ghetto and was able to visit my mother every second day. Antikol also went to share bread and any other food he had. One day he came back from the Ghetto with his head swollen and covered in blood. He told us that the policemen were angry with him for bringing bread, because such a large crowd gathered and so they'd hit him with their batons. We bandaged his head and begged him not to go back again, but he was

such a precious, goodhearted man, he refused to give up. He couldn't bear the thought of not helping hungry and miserable people.

### ***May begins***

The 1st of May was approaching. The Germans always held 'Aktions' on Soviet holidays and so we knew that something must be coming. They frequently searched us for gold or for weapons or any store of food we were keeping to give to our families and friends in the Ghetto. Once a week we were given bread, a little margarine and a little cheese. My group decided that I should be responsible for dividing these, because I was so evenhanded. I would then take my share to my Mom in the Ghetto.

In the evening, on the 1st of May we decorated the hall for the Germans, as it was their holiday too. The next day Dr. Landau (a German) entered the kitchen as usual to get some soup. Raya, my friend and I noticed that he was in a very bad mood. He passed on some information to Antikol, but he wouldn't tell us anything. After Dr. Landau left, Raya took my arm and suggested we'd better go to the Ghetto and check that everything was alright. Antikol hadn't wanted to tell us that the previous night, the Ghetto had been completely liquidated.

We ran to the Ghetto – it was empty! There was not one living soul, only a few people like us who'd come from town to search for their relatives. There were a lot of bodies lying in the streets, because those who had refused to co-operate were shot on the spot. Among the bodies I saw that of Pastranak. All the Ghetto representatives had been killed and buried together. In the previous 'Aktions' they'd worked so hard to save their

families and friends, but this time, they'd all been killed as well. We had been afraid that this terrible event would happen.

On the morning of May the 1<sup>st</sup>, the Ghetto chief had sent 170 workers to an Army Fortress in Karpot. In desperation and hardly daring to hope, I ran to Karpot and to my great joy I found my mother there. There were now only 400 Jews left from 4000! The Ghetto Jews had been taken and killed at Pogylanka and Banhoff . In Pogylanka there were rows of hastily covered graves in the sand. We could see buttons, dummies, shoes – it was horrible!



Pogylanka Forest - waiting for death

In earlier times, Jewish families had come to Pogylanka to have picnics and enjoy themselves and now here they were – lying in pits. Whole generations disappeared, never anticipating such a horrible and cruel end. Later, when the Germans realised they were losing the war, they sent Sonderkommandos (special groups of Jews) to dig up those bodies and bury them. As soon they finished their work, the Sonderkommandos were killed as well.

### ***My job finishes***

It was the end of 1942 and we lived in hope of some improvements. We met Jews working in other places and told each other the latest news – most of it bad. Without

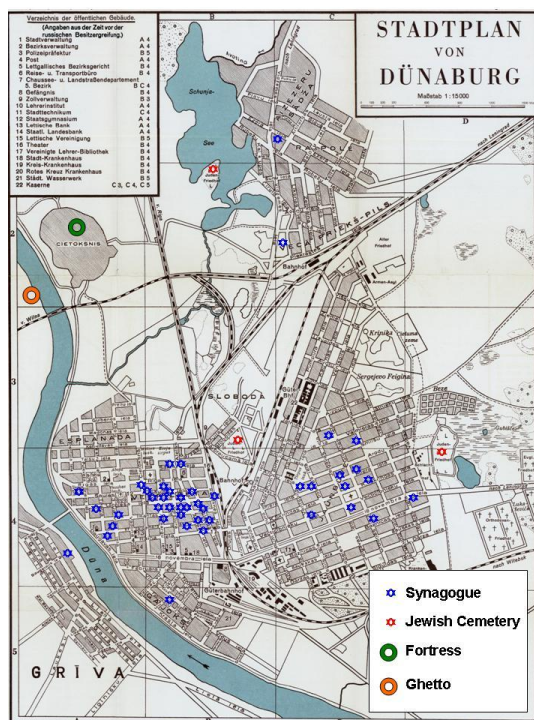
warning, an order was issued that all the Railway working Jews must leave and go to the Fortress at Karpot. I wasn't upset as it meant I could be with my mother. The Railway kitchen closed down and only Antikol was allowed to stay there because he was a tailor. I didn't have much work in Karpot. Antikol wanted me to come to work in town and he asked the kitchen chef to arrange the permit. Antikol knew that we had no money or jewellery to exchange for food and without work, my mother and I would starve. I decided to return to the city. Lisa, who worked with me in the kitchen and I, lived in a room of a very small house that Antikol had in the yard of the Railway station. He lived and worked in the other room.

### ***The secret abortions***

We would try to help people however we could. If there was a pregnant woman needing an abortion, Dr. Landau would come to our house and I would help her. Antikol would lock the door as if we weren't at home, so the Germans couldn't take us at that time.

On one occasion a woman in the sixth month of her pregnancy, came for an abortion. The doctor gave her an injection to induce labour, but although she stayed the night at our house, her contractions didn't start. The next morning the woman and the doctor went off to work as usual. At noon they came back and she gave birth to a baby boy who died. I had to take the body away to dispose of it. It was really dangerous and although I was frightened of being discovered, there was no choice. This woman stayed with us for several days until her husband took her home. There were quite a few cases like this and each one put us in extreme danger.

## 7. Making Plans



German Map of Dvinsk

At the beginning of 1943, Antikol and I worked outside the Ghetto, staying in the small red building near the Railway Station. There were 6 workers: 4 men and 2 women, and of course, we slept in separate rooms. Every night the Germans locked us in. We worked very hard, but despite that, we were pleased that we were employed. (An amazing fact was that, the area where we worked was located just 5 minutes from Antikol's own house...)

Once a week I went to visit my Mom in the Ghetto, a 10 km return journey. Each time I got a permit. Sometimes I went by myself, sometimes with other kids who were going to visit their parents. As we were not allowed to walk on the sidewalks, we walked on the road. Lying on the edge of the road, I saw dead Russian soldiers with their boots on. On my way back, their boots had vanished.

Suddenly, we got news that the Germans had suffered a crushing defeat at Stalingrad. There were obvious signs of defeat everywhere and for us, it raised the possibility of hope for rescue and survival. We started to discuss our situation in earnest. Antikol was very clear headed and we were quite sure that the Germans in retreat would undoubtedly destroy all living evidence of their atrocities, so we decided to make plans for when the right moment came to leave, and looked for places to escape to and hide in.

We knew a Goya whose son was a policeman. She promised to hide Antikol, me and my Mom in her basement, but only for a short time, because she was well aware of the danger in hiding Jews. One night, we went to see the house where she lived. We also made contact with a Polish farmer named Shidlovsky, who worked for the same Germans who were also our employers. They chose him because these Germans were from the Shlezia area and spoke Polish like he did. This farmer promised us a hiding place on his farm which was located 13 kilometers away from the other side of the Dvina River, on the road to Kumbuli. We began to store up food and clothes and wait for the crucial moment to escape.

We felt that the Germans were in a very bad position. They continued to suffer losses and as we lived near the Railway Station, we watched many trains with wounded German soldiers rolling in. During Purim, 3 boys escaped from Karpot to the Partisans and the Germans became more vigilant. Spasmodically, searches were made for gold and guns. I was always fearful during these searches because I knew Antikol, by sewing for the Goyim, had some bread hidden. If it had been discovered, we would definitely have been killed.



### ***Praying at the cemetery***

During this period of waiting, we would go by the back streets and alleyways to the cemetery and pray at the grave of Rabbi Meir Gaon.

Antikol also prayed at his father's grave. To be there was very dangerous, but our determination overcame fear.



Leib Antikol by his father's Grave before the War - Joana son of Mordehay

### ***My father's coat***

My mother was working in Karpast, sorting out the clothes of murdered Jews. Suddenly she found my father's coat which had large blue pockets. We had given it to a friend of mine from Kraslava, who'd had nothing. He'd been sent to Dvinsk with the first group and he'd gone to his death with his father and his sister.

The Germans and the Latvians sent all the clothes of the Jews they'd killed to Karpast to be sorted into appropriate piles. Some of the Jews who did the sorting would find something of value and keep it to sell to the Goyim or exchange it for food, but my mother and my friend Paula couldn't bring themselves to do that and they left everything there.

### ***A cattle truck full of Jews***

At Rosh Hashanah, September 1943, while we were praying together, a German we knew, came and told us that a locked cattle truck full of Jews was standing at the Railway Station. When I heard this, I took off my 'yellow patch', picked up a basket with a little food and went to see the train. I saw many trucks with a small windows and Ukrainian guards standing around. I discovered that these Jews had been brought from Russia, but I wasn't allowed to approach them. The Ukrainians even threatened to shoot me! I hid nearby and cried for their awful fate and I couldn't help thinking that very soon I might be standing in their shoes. A short time after that, we saw another train. This time it was from Vilna and the Jews there were permitted to use the toilets and on that occasion the guard was much more humane and I was able to give them some bread.



Cattle truck of Jews

## 8. Our Escape

After the holidays, our situation became more urgent. We talked again with the Polish farmer, Shidlovsky. I intended to go dressed as a Goya with his daughter who would come with a horse and cart, in order to familiarize myself with the route to their farm, but my mother was so afraid that I'd be caught and wouldn't allow me to do it. We didn't tell anyone about our escape plan, not even the other Jews we were working with. We felt sure that we would never be released and that the Germans would kill us before our freedom ever arrived. We knew that we'd have to make an escape attempt very soon and that initially, we should find a safe location near our house, as we worked there.

Opposite us, lived Goya "Dvoranichka" who had a blind husband and a young son. Antikol had sewed several pairs of trousers for him, so our decision was: The first flight would be to Goya "Dvoranichka's" house. The second move would be to the Goya who had the policeman son and then we'd decide how to move after that. All of this was planned down to the last detail.

Our biggest concern was that my mother didn't work in town and wasn't living with us so I was anxious that she wouldn't be there when we had to leave. It was the end of November 1943 on Wednesday night, when my mother and two other women came to visit us from the Ghetto. They told us that the tension in Karpot was terrible and everyone was very fearful. All three of them then returned to the Ghetto. What a terrible shame!!! If my mother had just stayed that night with us, she would have escaped!

### ***The moment arrived***

Early the next morning, we heard a knock on our door (as we were locked in every night) followed by clapping hands, which was an agreed signal that something was going to happen. It was the Goya named Anka, the one we worked with in the kitchen, who was knocking. She informed us that on her way to work, she'd seen a group of Jews who worked in the Perpelgunespunkt area being taken away under guard. This was the reason she was in such a hurry to talk to us. The moment of our escape had arrived! Antikol stood and prayed and I quickly dressed myself. Antikol took a hidden bracelet, a cache of jewels, and hid some on himself and gave me some to hide in my bra. I painted my lips and put on a headscarf like a Goya and we went across to the Goya's house. I also had time to warn the shoemaker in Riga Street of the danger and return.

### ***The first flight***

The Goya's house was across from the Railway Station. We ran across the street to Goya "Dvoranichka." (Dvoranichka is 'janitor' in Russian, the person that holds all the keys to open the gates). We were lucky we had arranged it with her in advance. She took us down to the basement under the kitchen floor, where she stored potatoes. The air was foul but we had no choice. At that time we weren't fully convinced that the last Jews had been collected so I carefully and unobtrusively went out and was told that the Jews were being rounded up and being taken to trucks waiting at platform number 2. After I came back to the basement, we overheard the Goya telling her husband that she'd discussed with her neighbor about having Antikol the tailor, in her house and the neighbor recommended getting rid of him. Although her husband was blind, he refused to allow her to do this, but we realized that for us it was no longer safe to be there. It was abundantly clear that it was indeed, the most serious moment of our lives!

### ***The second move***

When it got dark, we left this hiding place and made our way to the house of Mrs Bagayuk, who'd promised to help us for a short time. She was a Latvian woman whose husband was also blind. In the past she had known Antikol and he'd provided fur for her. Only her son, who was a policeman, was aware of us hiding there in their house, but not his father and sister. All the Goyim knew that Jews were being sent to an unknown place. Goya Bagayuk was standing outside her house, waiting for us. She was expecting us but as we arrived, her first question was: "Where is your mother?" Overwhelmed, I began to cry. Hastily, she took us indoors into a small room and closed the door. Unfortunately, at that time, she had relatives visiting from Libova. She and her son told us that the Germans were searching everywhere for the last Jews who remained and were taking them by trains to the gas in the "Kaezer Wald" (Now its name is "Mega Park"). Although the Goya managed to give us some milk and pancakes, we were very thirsty and extremely hot. I felt as if I were burning, and Antikol had a very high fever.

I will never forget that night! Someone knocked on the door. At first I thought it was my mother, that she had managed to escape and join us, but when the knock came again so loudly, I feared perhaps the police had come to search for us. In fact, it was just her son's friends calling to collect him for "work" – many Jews had escaped at the last moment and they were out searching for them. (These searches were called 'Abvalus')

The next morning, Goya Bagayuk came and told us how desperate the search for Jews was. Every possible place was being checked carefully and any Jews who were found, were being taken to the station and put into cattle trucks. She informed us we couldn't hide in her house any more. As it happened, we hadn't planned to stay there

long term, just for the initial part of our escape. However, she promised to send her son with us, so we felt very much safer hearing that. Her son said that if someone recognized us as Jews, he would say that he was taking us to the Police (Komenzmor) and thus we could avoid capture.

### ***A promise fulfilled***

It was Friday, market day, and many farmers were returning home. Antikol wore a raincoat and I carried an old basket containing bread and cheese, in the Goyim manner. Goya Bagayuk's son came back home and we were ready to go. Our first big hurdle was the bridge across the Dvina River. It was guarded by policemen and for us it was dangerous. Her son reminded us again that if someone stopped us he would tell them that he'd caught us and was taking us to prison. In the end, we crossed the river in a small boat. We took many small side roads, no one recognized us and eventually we reached the Griva Zone. We asked to be taken to the road leading to the Kumbula village.



Kumbula River, near the Kumbuli Village

On the road I managed to see the 17 km sign to Kumbula. We needed to walk 13 kilometers of it, where the farm of the Polish farmer, Shidlovsky was located. We didn't tell the policeman anything about our destination and he didn't ask – he understood our need for secrecy. He walked us to the next sign. It was getting dark and chilly and a light rain had started to fall. We saw a small house nearby.

He was kind enough to go in and ask for some matches, so we would be able to see the signs in the dark.

We saw the sign indicating 4 km to Kumbula, so we thanked and kissed him and Antikol gave him a suit. He told us that he was sure that there would come a day when we could return the favor. In such horrible times, who could imagine that such a day would come?! We parted and walked off into the darkness.

### ***Finding Shidlovsky's farm***

We walked in the direction of Shidlovsky's house. The only information we had was that he lived at the 13th kilometer. Our hearts were pounding, not knowing for certain if he'd let us stay or not. Antikol was burning with a fever. I supported him on my shoulder as we walked, so our progress was very slow. At each road sign I'd light a match and check the number of kilometers.

At the 9th kilometer, Antikol begged me to sit and rest a little but I knew from experience that if I'd let him sit, he wouldn't be able to get up again. It was very dark and the rain was falling quite heavily. We were wet and frozen and feeling weak and so close to despair. Mustering what little strength we had left, we trudged on. We came to another sign and although it was difficult to light a match, we saw that it was the 11th km! We were so happy because it meant that we'd missed the 10th km signpost and had come further than we'd thought.

When we arrived at the 13th km sign, it was in complete darkness. We knew that Shidlovsky's farm was there, but we didn't know its exact locality. We didn't hesitate and left the main road to follow a narrow path we saw from afar. We had options: We could have gone to the house on the right, we could have gone to the house on the left, we could have gone ... But here, God was with us!

## 9. Hiding at the Farm

We chose the large house on the left with a farm well nearby and knocked on the door, uncertain whether it was actually Shidlovsky's house. We heard voices on the other side of the door. I asked if this was Shidlovsky's house, but by then we'd already recognized his voice and we almost passed out from exhaustion and excitement. Shidlovsky's first question was also: "Where is your mother?" When the Goya Bagayuk had asked me about my mother, I still had some hope that she would escape and join us, but now, I held no hope at all. They took us inside and gave us something to drink. We were too exhausted to eat. Early in the morning he took us out to the barn ('Saray' in Russian). He wondered how we had managed to find his house and if we had knocked on any other doors or had been seen. We told him that no one had seen us and that not even a dog would have been out in such awful weather. He was really amazed that on such a dark night and without knowing the area, we'd found his house without asking for directions.

### ***Our cramped nook***

For a long time Antikol was very sick, but our safer situation made him stronger! The Goy had organized a hiding place for us some time before. Earlier in August, he'd brought in a cart load of hay and laid it over some sticks he'd leaned up against the side of the barn like a tent. In there, he'd formed an empty space. In one corner was a very narrow entrance which we had to crawl through on our hands and knees. Inside, the space was short and narrow and we could only lie there or sit a little. Once a day they'd lower us food by rope and we had a bucket to use for a toilet. Once every two days, we'd push the bucket through the entrance and then I'd empty it three or four meters away. The smell shocked me. Only once,



during our time there, (about 9 months) were we permitted to wash ourselves at the Goy's house. On that occasion I also washed our shirts. Naturally, they were full of lice, but we had to wear them because we had nothing else.

### ***My body is changing...***

Suddenly, I began to feel sick and noticed I was putting on weight! Horrified, I realized that I must be pregnant... in those ghastly circumstances, with the constant filth and cold, hunger and fear, and yet there was no choice. We could only pray for a miracle. In case the farmer discovered my pregnancy and decided to get rid of us, we began to hide small pieces of bread so we would have food on the run, at least for a few days.

### ***Sewing at nights***

Several months had passed by and Shidlovsky realized that no-one had any idea about our hiding on his property, so he allowed us to come up to his house at night. By the light of a small kerosene lamp, we sewed very nice coats and jackets and other clothes for him and his family. Later on, we sewed for other people too. The Shidlovsky's told them that their daughter had become a tailor, so we taught them how to take people's preliminary measurements. We were really pleased to leave our cramped hiding place and be able to stretch our backs again and of course we were happy to be able to help the Goy. We also knew that he got good payment for the clothes we sewed.

While we sewed at night, we'd drink a cup of hot tea, without sugar – but at least it was hot! During the long, cold day in the hiding place, I would daydream at length about this hot tea. Shidlovsky provided us with just a little food – except on holidays when they would give us a bit more, and better quality. Antikol insisted that I should take some more of his, but I refused because I knew he wasn't well.

### ***My shoes***

The cold winter of January 1944 arrived. Shidlovsky's daughter took a fancy to my shoes. Without asking, she demanded I give them to her and gave me her old boots instead, which were too small and full of holes. I could barely manage to get out of the nook and walk to their house.

### ***Spending 6480 hours with Antikol***

Each day passed tediously, lying in our tiny refuge in the barn. Every day Antikol would recite the entire prayers of Psalms and then we would spend hours telling each other about our past lives and about our families. He would tell me about his mother, Toibe, about his elder sister Sadie and about his younger brother Harry, who had all emigrated to America 20 years ago, when he had decided to stay in Latvia. Naturally, we discussed food...



Antikol 17 years old



Toibe, Antikol's Mother



Antikol's Sister, Sadie



Antikol's Brother (Hershel) Harry

### ***Our betrothal ceremony***

As I was pregnant and we weren't a married couple, I told Antikol that he had to marry me otherwise, God would punish us and we would never experience liberation. And so, it happened on the night of January the 1<sup>st</sup> 1944. We counted the days until the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Teveth – when the sky was clear and bright and we could see the moon and the shining stars. At the same time as the farmer got us out of the nook to go to his house for our sewing work at night, Antikol made the "Mekadesh" (Betrothal) with a gold bracelet that we had kept.

He took the bracelet and declared:  
"With this ring, I thee wed  
according to the Laws  
of Moses and Israel!"



The Betrothal bracelet



Pesia Zislin



Leib Antikol

We had neither ring nor three witnesses – just me and him! Together, we dreamt of a miracle, that our freedom would arrive before our baby was born. I had no idea how far advanced my pregnancy was, and I was terrified that because of the horrible conditions, I might die. I begged Antikol that if I died and he survived, to have me buried near the grave of my grandfather in Kraslava.

### ***"Gogelmogel" surprise***

Harsh days continued to pass by, but no miracle occurred for us. We continued to sew lovely clothes for Shidlovsky's daughter and she would surreptitiously give me "gogelmogel" using two eggs (a Yiddish concoction of eggs and sugar). Its taste was unbelievable, I enjoyed it so much! Sadly, I had to wash the cup, so her parents would not know that she'd spoiled me. I thought to myself that if God allowed me to survive, then I would always eat "gogelmogel!"

### ***The pigsty***

Eventually, Shidlovsky noticed my enlarged belly, and realised that I was pregnant. He told us that if we had a baby, he wouldn't allow us to stay. We didn't want to imagine what would become of us and so we just continued praying for a miracle. Passover arrived and we had to move to another hiding place. Through the winter time, the cows had eaten our hay and so we were put in the pigsty. There was only hay above us and when it rained, the water ran straight through, and because of the dirt it was red. Between us and the pigs was only a very narrow partition. We could do nothing about it! We had to be pleased with such inhuman conditions.

### ***News***

Spring arrived. Shidlovsky would come back from the market telling us the news he'd got in the city. The Germans were burning and destroying everything before they retreated and the Russians were making trouble for anyone who'd co-operated with the Germans. We felt no sympathy for any of them and waited for the freedom that the Russians would provide for us – hopefully before I gave birth to our baby. We didn't know what was happening at the Front. We still believed that the Germans were strong and not so far away.

### ***My pregnancy***

I had become very advanced in my pregnancy and very fearful. I knew nothing about childbirth or how I'd cope – I'd never been interested in having babies before. This was my first and unplanned pregnancy and I had no one to ask.

### ***Here it comes...***

It was a sunny Friday. I think it was 29th of June. Shidlovsky went to the market in the city. That morning, my waters broke. While I was wondering what was happening, I suddenly felt a terrible pain, not realizing that the waters breaking was a sign of the birth to come. Antikol held my hands because I couldn't allow myself to cry out. I endured these pains all day long and in the evening when Shidlovsky's wife came to milk the cows, Antikol told her how badly I was feeling. Later on, the pains came very quickly and severely, so much so that I thought I must certainly be going to die. The pains were intensifying greatly and I was very close to giving birth.

What were we going to do? Shidlovsky's wife brought water and Antikol, being familiar with the calving of cows, took the delivery on himself. It took place on a coat in the pigsty... thus our baby was born! She was very fair and surprisingly big! We had a razor and Antikol cut the cord and wrapped the baby in a rag.

### ***The placenta***

Shidlovsky's wife came to the barn and Antikol told her that I'd already given birth, but there was a problem with the placenta, which was not coming out. It was still attached to my womb. She told us that when her husband returned from the market he would get the placenta out, because he always used to take care of it with the pigs. When I heard this, I felt sick. Antikol started gently massaging my belly, tugging at the cord and succeeded at last in removing it. I felt much better.

### ***Begging and praying***

We didn't tie the baby's umbilical cord. We begged and pleaded for the Shidlovskys to be merciful and leave the baby at the church door in the village. But they refused! For them it was just a Jidovsky child! (derogatory nickname for a Jewish child). Antikol and I sobbed bitterly and didn't know what to do. The Goy gave us an ultimatum – us or the baby! We knew we couldn't stay there and keep our baby. Where could we go? Who was going to hide us? We decided that it was God's will! I'd had a baby and survived, despite the filthy, unhygienic conditions. That in itself, was a great miracle!

By the time the farmer returned from the market, it was all over! I cried and cried...I saw Antikol cover the baby... He did everything for me. He didn't want me to see her. The baby had cried and then slowly, become quiet. Forever. It was the end of a tiny pinch of hope that somehow, perhaps, we could save her life. Our naivety dissolved! Oh my, even now, when I remember this baby, my heart is so sorrowful, I can't stop crying ... Shidlovsky made a little basket, and in it he put the small, white innocent body and he buried our daughter – the one who had died to save her parents! We asked her to forgive us!

After this traumatic event, we hated the Shidlovskys with a burning hatred and couldn't forgive them! Especially as we knew that one of the churches in that area was more liberal and he could have left the baby there. We also heard that the Provoslavians managed to adopt Jewish babies.

### ***After the birth***

Two days after the birth, Shidlovsky's wife brought me a dead chicken to pluck. As I worked, I cried and felt that it was my body that was being plucked. This woman had borne children too, but in her eyes I wasn't an ordinary

young mother – I was just a Jew! In the Shidlovsky's eyes, the pigs were more important!

### ***A new hiding place***

Two more weeks passed by and the Goy came with good news: the Germans were running away! He told us we'd have to leave our hiding place because the Russians were bombing the area and everyone had to go to the forest. Early the next morning, he took us to a wild, prickly area in the forest at the bottom of the hill. His own family, he took much further up, so we shouldn't be seen to be associated with them. While we were hurrying, I injured my leg so badly that I couldn't bear to put any weight on it and I had to hop. Without any medical help, my leg recovered very slowly and painfully. Antikol and I began to dig out a hole big enough to hide in. Both of us had been sick and were worn out, but we worked steadily until we had succeeded.

That evening the Goy came to take us back to the pigsty. The following morning we returned to the forest to complete our hole digging, but we found it full of water. We asked Shidlovsky to help us to cut trees to put branches above the water in the hole, and asked for more tools than just the spades he had provided. At first, he refused but then he changed his mind, asking for a reward. Reluctantly, we were forced to give him the gold bracelet that Antikol had married me with.

Eventually we moved into our new hiding place. We stayed there for more than a month. Every second day the Goy or one of his children would bring us some food. This place was wild and rough and we tried to camouflage our hiding place with brush. Our entrance was at the side and at night we could look out and watch the glowworms.

A battle between the Russians and the Germans was fought nearby. Bullets were flying over our heads but we

were so happy to have reached this point of freedom. Yet, at the same time, we were suffering badly over our daughter's fate. If we had known that freedom was so close, we'd have left the farm and gone to the forest... But who knew? Who could have guessed? Later, we realized that Shidlovsky had actually known about the Russian's imminent arrival and avoided telling us... Therefore, we couldn't forgive him!

### ***Antikol's dream***

One morning, Antikol awoke and told me: "Today our freedom has really come!" He told me that he had dreamed that four angels were standing in four corners, defending him.

Several hours later, we heard a call: "ma...ma...ma". This was the agreed upon call of Anka, Shidlovsky's daughter. She came to bring us food, but she couldn't find our hiding hole, because it was hidden so well. Then she shouted again : "ma.... ma... ma..." and we lifted our heads. She showed us a photo of Stalin and told us that the Russian Army had arrived in the village. There had been little German resistance and they had gone!

I sobbed, I'm not sure whether it was from joy or pain... There were bitter tears for all of my family, for my relatives, for my friends.

But the greatest pain was for  
Our Lost Baby Daughter!





## 10. Our Liberation

We moved back to the pigsty, because Shidlovsky wouldn't allow us in their house. He was in great fear – he knew that the Russians would see him as a traitor, someone who'd helped the Germans. At night they locked the sty with a heavy iron bar, but we were so excited and not so quiet. We wanted to leave that place as soon as we could. In the morning, when they came to milk the cows, we told them we were going to go back to the city. They didn't offer any assistance, so we said "shalom" and left on foot.



The route to the hidden Farm – Sarah following the track

On the pathway, we saw their neighbor, Baranovsky's house. We'd heard about his cruelty from the Goy's stories, and also other houses on the side roads... But on that fateful November night, we miraculously had seen nothing but the Polish Shidlovsky farm!

**It was, as if God's hand  
had guided us to the right house!!!**

### ***Creatures from another world***

After 13 kilometers, we reached the Griva – Dvinsk road. I think it was 11:00 am. My clothes were like rags and I was still limping from my injured leg. Antikol's white coat had turned green and black from mould caused by the dampness of the hideaway in the forest. Our hair was filthy and unkempt. Most Goyim that we saw, looked at us like we were creatures from another planet, although several of them offered us a ride on their carts. Slowly and painfully, we arrived at the River Dvina. The bridges were either burned or broken. A Goy in his tiny boat took us one by one across the river.



Dvina River

On the other bank of the river I found a pair of shoes and they fitted me perfectly! Someone had thrown them down the bank and I took them gratefully and put them on my painful feet.

We walked into the city but I didn't see any people. Everything had been destroyed – windows, houses, life. We were amazed that we had survived to return to Dvinsk after such a long time, free and alive, after facing the nearness of death so often. We couldn't believe that we were walking on the same path, like any other human being.



We walked along Riga St. from the left side in the direction of the Railway station and then we approached Kraslava Rd. We saw a destroyed house on the corner of the street. Then, we looked a little further ahead and to our surprise, we saw Antikol's house in white brick, standing whole!



Antikol's house



Sarah visits after 69 years

### ***Antikol's house***

We got to his house, but he did not want to go in. First, he wanted to go to the small house where we'd worked together at the Railway Station, where he had hidden the prayer shawls and sacred books in the attic. He'd promised God that before he entered his own house, he would go and retrieve the Holy books and shawls. I waited for him. I was very weak and I sat down by the roadside. Unfortunately, his belongings were no longer there.

### ***Antikol's daughter's photo***

He came back and we entered the apartment on the first floor together. We found a room full of his furniture and on the wall was an exquisite photo of his daughter, Rivale. The Germans who had taken over this apartment had left this photo, not realizing that it was a Jewish girl.

Antikol broke down and cried. He kissed the photo and whispered: "Rivale, my Rivale..." This was the first time I had seen him crying. In his daughter's buffet we found "the yellow flower" made of glass.



Antikol's daughter Rivale



The yellow glass flower

Later, we went up to the second floor where Antikol had hidden for a time. The apartment was locked and we had no keys, so Antikol went to Dvoranishka, the wife of the blind man who lived by the Railway Station, and she gave him a bunch of keys so we could open the door. We found it empty – everything had been stolen. We moved the white cupboard and the buffet from the lower floor and created a room. It was an enormous effort. We were overcome by the luxury. After living in a dirty nook and being constantly covered with lice, we had come into a house full of light. It seemed incredible to us, especially me, that we were two of a very few surviving Jews.

## **Our Freedom was reached on the 28th of July 1944 (:**

### ***The bracelet calls***

The gold bracelet we were forced to give to the farmer for his help in creating the hiding hole in the forest, called to us – its real owners...

After our liberation, Shidlovsky visited us in Dvinsk, asking for a loan. He came with our bracelet and a ring which he wanted to give us as security on the loan repayment.

We agreed. As we wanted our own bracelet back, we bought a similar one. At first when he came to return the loan, he refused to take the other bracelet. We explained that his ring was as precious to him as our bracelet was to us. At last he was convinced to make the switch and Antikol also gave him two silver watches. The Goy valued Antikol highly, because he was a wealthy and honorable man. When we were hiding on his farm, we knew that he used to prepare alcohol illegally and from time to time, he asked us for our help. He also knew that no one would ever discover his deeds through Antikol.

### ***A new existence***

We started our new life. We had two children, Jacob and Sarah. Antikol insisted that the children should be named after my parents. He said that I was the one who'd lost my entire family, more than him, whose family had emigrated to America.

### ***Antikol***

Unfortunately, after a short time, on May 30th 1949, Antikol passed away. I lost a precious, kind friend, and a loving father to my children. Because of him, I had survived! For me, Antikol's death was like a second holocaust. It was so traumatic, as he was being treated in hospital for a urinary tract infection. I got a message to take him home but when I arrived at the hospital to get him, I found an empty bed.

I was left with two little children: Jacob, 4 years old and Sarah, just a baby. As a widow, I worked hard and raised my children with devotion and determination. After four years, I married a decent, kind man named Zeev Gelvan. Due to his Polish citizenship, we could emigrate to Israel.

## **The Dream of my Youth Came True!**

## 11. Epilogue

Sarah speaks:

My mother, Pessia, passed away when she was 92 years old.

She had 6 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

Her whole life was influenced by that shadow of a constant awareness of danger. She was conscious that during those demanding periods of survival, the concepts of good and evil had been erased. She used to say that she was afraid to die, because she might meet the ones she hadn't been able to help and they could be upset. Always, she felt calm because her conscience guided her, and above all, she was completely sure that there was a God who always stood by her side.

Despite everything that happened to her, she was able to encourage all of us to appreciate life and always hope for the best. She used to say:

"Life is like a wheel. never know what is standing behind it, so we should do the best we can now, in order to be happy."

Sarah Milshtein, nee Antikol.



# THE SHADOW OF MY YOUTH



**This memoir was written** by my mother, Pesia Zislin.

She was a survivor of the Latvian Dvinsk Ghetto, and turned out to be one of a few survivors of her hometown, Kraslava.

She was motivated to write it because she found that so little had been written about the horrible suffering of the Jews of the Dvinsk area, where they had faced continuous 'Aktions', hunger, sickness, humiliation and of course the constant fear of death.

Those who survived would bear for their entire life, mental and physical scars; for them there would never be again, a night without fear or a day without heartache.

Clearly, this is an accurate description of herself.

**This book is dedicated** to the memories of my mother's family and my late father Leib Antikol, whom she met in the Ghetto.

I can recall hearing repeatedly about:

"Me and Antikol in the "nook."

This "nook" was the hide-out in the pigpen, where they hid for 270 days after their courageous escape; the location of the cruel childbirth she went through and their struggle towards salvation.

**It should be noted** that the story here is presented in a different format than the one that was written with the same title in the 1980s.

The reason is that during my endless conversations with Mom I got way more details, which I have incorporated as well as more photos to express the events more clearly.

"Mom, please, smile a little" I would often beg.

Her usual response was:

"I cannot smile because I have no reason to smile"!

This is our mother and this is her story in her own words.

**Sarah Antikol- Milshtein, their daughter**